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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001576

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2019

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: DEMOCRAT PARTY BACK FROM THE GRAVE?

REF: ANKARA 1538

ANKARA 00001576 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The center right Democrat Party (DP) and Motherland Party (ANAP) held a joint party congress October 31 to implement their merger under the Democrat Party name. Although the two parties together regularly poll no more than five percent in public opinion surveys, the merger ends two decades of acrimony, creating a single prominent party in the center of the political spectrum. The new DP is not yet ready for prime time, but its spirits are high, it already has a member in parliament, and it may be able to attract a group of unaffiliated or disgruntled politicians looking for shelter. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Since their failure to join in an electoral alliance for the 2007 general elections, DP and ANAP have been negotiating a merger of their parties with the intent of unifying, and thereby reviving, the center of Turkey's political spectrum. The negotiations bore their first fruit on October 31: at a joint party congress held at the Ataturk Sport Center in Ulus, the two parties combined under the theme "Turkey Is Coming Together" to merge their party structures. The venue was packed and a lively atmosphere of reconciliation prevailed, symbolized by a large photograph of former presidents Turgut Ozal (ANAP) and Suleyman Demirel (DP) in close conference.

¶3. (SBU) Any lingering animosities among the two parties' supporters were not in evidence. During the opening ceremonies, a film presenting the history of Turkey's center-right governments depicted both parties' forebears. Not only were clips of Ozal and Demirel warmly applauded, but the whole of the participants gave hearty applause to images of former PMs Mesut Yilmaz (ANAP) and Tansu Ciller (DP), who were primarily responsible for the bad blood between the parties and whose mismanagement of the country caused the rapid decline of the center right. The only negative sentiments expressed at the gathering were loud jeers at the mention of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

¶4. (SBU) The chairmen of the two parties -- Salih Uzun from ANAP and Husamettin Cindoruk from DP -- each addressed the room in turn. Uzun focused on the past of the two parties, praising the spirit of Ozal and Demirel and emphasizing that both parties are embodiments of the people-focused politics of the Justice Party of the 1950s, led by Adnan Menderes and Celal Bayar. In an act of contrition, he declared that both

ANAP and DP had wasted the 1990s by engaging in petty arguing and narrow interests, saying, "The fault was ours, not that of you, the voters." He then predicted that with the parties unified, the bickering would finally end, and the new DP would return to the forefront of Turkish politics and work cohesively to better the country.

15. (SBU) Cindoruk -- who had emerged from negotiations as the agreed chairman of the unified party -- focused on the future of the party in his speech. He listed a number of development goals that the party would strive to reach if elected to parliament, including investment in roads, dams, and airports. Lamenting that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's Democratic Initiative had been hijacked by a delegation of PKK members returning from Iraq (which he termed a "platoon of guerrillas"), Cindoruk argued that a state abiding by the rule of law would not need to implement such an initiative. Refusing to settle for what he termed "quarter democracy," he insisted that only a party of the center, open to members from the left and the right -- not the AKP -- could bring full democracy to Turkey. He also lambasted the AKP, scolding it for using images of Menderes and Ozal in its March 2009 local election campaign, and for recently issuing posters of Erdogan writing on a blackboard -- in secularists' minds, a nearly-blasphemous allusion to famous photos of Ataturk teaching the modern Turkish alphabet in the 1920s. Following the speeches, the ANAP delegates voted to dissolve their party and merge their assets with the DP.

16. (C) Perhaps more interesting than those speaking, however, were those who did not. A surprising number of politicians, whether independents or disaffected members of other parties, participated as observers. Foremost among these was former

ANKARA 00001576 002.2 OF 002

ANAP PM Mesut Yilmaz, who served as occasional moderator during the ANAP-DP unification negotiations. Yilmaz Buyukersen, the Democratic Left Party (DSP) mayor of greater Eskişehir, and Tayfun Icli, an independent member of parliament who resigned from DSP only last month, also sat in. Celal Dogan, formerly of the Republican People's Party, was also notable -- as a Kurd and former mayor of Gaziantep, he highlights one of the traditional bastions of ANAP's voter base. Other notables included Ufuk Soylemez and Mehmet Ali Bayar, influential DP members from the Tansu Ciller years, and Nasrin Nas, a former ANAP chairman. Notably absent were former chairmen Mehmet Agar (DP) and Erkan Mumcu (ANAP) whose earlier negotiations failed to bring the parties together before general elections in 2007, and former DP Prime Minister Tansu Ciller. Following the convention, Mesut Yilmaz and Celal Dogan announced they had formally joined the DP. Yilmaz's membership gives DP one seat in Parliament.

17. (C) Mehmet Ali Bayar told us November 2 that the party's spirits are running high, and contended that in the past 48 hours many people who had kept their distance from both DP and ANAP are now hustling to sign up. He noted that Cindoruk initially had agreed to serve only as a "caretaker" leader for the new DP, but that Cindoruk is now given much credit for managing the merger and also has a reputation as a formidable debater -- implying that he might well stay on through the next elections. Bayar conceded that the party's immediate aim is simply to get past the ten percent threshold, and then form a coalition government. DP considers both goals within reach. He added that DP's main theme will be pushing ahead on EU accession, a goal which in his view no longer appears to be an AKP priority. DP is also drafting and will soon unveil a new Turkish Constitution, which will propose a lowering of the electoral threshold to bring in many voters who now find themselves disenfranchised, and also as a means to accommodate ethnic minorities in Turkey, not least the Kurds.

18. (C) Comment: The new DP has potential but is not yet ready for prime time. That the DP was able to absorb ANAP

without acrimony is an important first step. It should mean that there will be no inter-party squabbling that had previously debased the brand of both ANAP and DP. That DP is drawing the interest of leftist politicians shows that the party is shifting to the middle -- while this does cede ground to the AKP, it attempts to encroach on disgruntled CHP voters who support it only because they see no other acceptable option. The party can trade on their past traditions as shorthand for an as-yet developing platform. The main element that is missing is a true leader. Cindoruk seems unlikely to fill this role. An uninspiring speaker in his 73rd year, Cindoruk also carries the onus of having been the leader of a group of DP MPs who, in cooperation with the military, left their party in a bid to destabilize Tansu Ciller's government coalition with a religious party in 1997.

As leader he will have difficulty convincing the populace that the new party is not as fractured and opportunistic as the DP and ANAP of the past. None of the other attendees appear to have either the charm or control over the party to stand as a viable leader. Rumors that the head of the Turkish Union of Chambers of Commerce (TOBB), Rifat Hisarciklioglu, may step into the leadership position swirl among our contacts and the press, but to date he has made no such gesture. Still, with general elections due in the spring of 2011 at the latest, DP should have time to put itself into position to run a coherent campaign.

JEFFREY

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